Amendments to the Claims:

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions and listings of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1.-8. (canceled)

9. (currently amended) A method for inhibiting an mRNA, comprising:

a) providing an RNA comprising the structure X_1-L-X_2, wherein X_1 and X_2 are nucleotide sequences having sufficient complementarity to one another to form a double-stranded stem hybrid and L is a flexible loop region comprising a non-nucleotide linker molecule of 10-24 atoms in length, wherein at least a portion of one of the nucleotide sequences located within the double-stranded stem is complementary to a sequence of the target mRNA; and

b) contacting the RNA comprising the structure X_1-L-X_2 with a sample *in vitro* containing or suspected of containing the target mRNA under conditions that favor transfection of the RNA comprising the structure X_1-L-X_2 into a cell comprising the target mRNA whereby presence of the RNA comprising the structure X_1-L-X_2 decreases expression of the target mRNA;

wherein X_1 and X_2 each independently comprise between about 19 to 27 nucleotides, and L comprises a polyether, a polyamine, a polyester, a polyphosphodiester, an alkylene, or a combination thereof.

10. (canceled)

11. (previously presented) The method according to claim 9, wherein L is a polyether and the polyether comprises a polyethylene glycol, a polyalcohol, a propylene glycol, or a combination thereof.

12. (previously presented) The method according to claim 9, wherein the RNA comprising the structure X_1-L-X_2 comprises an overhang.

13. (previously presented) The method according to claim 12, wherein the overhang comprises 1 to 5 nucleotides.

14. (previously presented) The method according to claim 13, wherein the overhang is a 3' overhang.

15. (previously presented) The method according to claim 13, wherein the overhang is a 5' overhang.

16. (previously presented) The method according to claim 9, wherein the RNA comprising the structure X_1-L-X_2 comprises a left hairpin.

17. (previously presented) The method according to claim 9, wherein the RNA comprising the structure X_1-L-X_2 comprises a right hairpin.

18. (previously presented) The method according to claim 9, wherein the RNA comprising the structure X_1-L-X_2 comprises a bulge.

19. (previously presented) The method according to claim 18, wherein the bulge is a stem loop bulge.

20. (previously presented) The method according to claim 18, wherein the bulge comprises a single uridine residue opposing a double uridine residue.

21. (previously presented) The method according to claim 9, wherein X_1 or X_2 is 100% complementary to the target mRNA.

22. (previously presented) The method according to claim 9, wherein L is covalently attached to X_1 and to X_2 via an ether, an ester, a carbamate, a phosphate ester, or an amine linkage.

23. (currently amended) A method for inhibiting a target mRNA, comprising:

a) providing an RNA comprising the structure X_1-L-X_2, wherein X_1 and X_2 are nucleotide sequences having sufficient complementarity to one another to form a double-stranded stem hybrid and L is a loop region comprising a non-nucleotide linker molecule, wherein at least a portion of one of the nucleotide sequences located within the double-stranded stem is complementary to a sequence of the target mRNA; and

b) contacting the RNA comprising the structure X_1-L-X_2 with a sample *in vitro* containing or suspected of containing the target mRNA under conditions that favor transfection of the RNA comprising the structure X_1-L-X_2 into a cell comprising the target mRNA whereby presence of the RNA comprising the structure X_1-L-X_2 decreases expression of the target mRNA;

wherein X_1 and X_2 each independently comprise between about 19 to 27 nucleotides; L comprises a polyether, a polyamine, a polyester, a polyphosphodiester, an alkylene, or a combination thereof; L is 10-24 atoms in length; the RNA comprising the structure X_1-L-X_2 comprises a left hairpin RNA; and the left hairpin RNA comprising the structure X_1-L-X_2 comprises an overhang of 1 to 5 nucleotides and at least one bulge.

Please add the following new claim:

24. (new) A method for assaying whether a gene product is a suitable target for drug discovery comprising:

a) introducing an RNA which targets an mRNA of a gene for degradation into a cell *in vitro*, wherein said RNA comprises the structure X_1-L-X_2, wherein X_1 and X_2 are nucleotide sequences having sufficient complementarity to one another to form a double-

stranded stem hybrid and L is a flexible loop region comprising a non-nucleotide linker molecule of 10-24 atoms in length, wherein at least a portion of one of the nucleotide sequences located within the double-stranded stem hybrid is complementary to a sequence of said mRNA, wherein X_1 and X_2 each independently comprise between about 19 to 27 nucleotides, and L comprises a polyether, a polyamine, a polyester, a polyphosphodiester, an alkylene, or a combination thereof;

b) maintaining the cell of a) under conditions in which degradation of the mRNA occurs, resulting in decreased expression of the gene; and

c) determining the effect of the decreased expression of the gene on the cell, wherein if decreased expression has an effect, then the gene product is a target for drug discovery.